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07: Collaborative Writing

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Collaborative Writing

Monique Logan

Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to do the following:

1. Define successful and effective collaborative writing.
2. Explain and employ strategies for effective collaboration.
3. Explain and employ strategies for dealing with differences and conflict.

Perhaps you are just beginning your collegiate career, or you may be finishing it up. Either way, whether you're someone new to college or someone who has been around the block for a period of time, you've probably had some experience working in a group or on a team of some sort. You've probably been a part of an athletic or academic team. Perhaps not. Perhaps you have some group experience from being a cheerleader, a boy scout or girl scout or a member of the 4H Club. Either way, I'm sure you're familiar with the inner workings of a team or group environment.

But have you been fortunate enough to work collaboratively in a writing capacity? Whether your answer is "yes" or "no," this chapter is designed to help you look more closely at what it means to write collaboratively.

In this chapter, we will focus on writing in groups or teams. Specifically, we will discuss *collaborative writing*, which differs slightly from team and group writing.

- Collaborative writing defined
- Successful collaborative writing
- Ineffective collaborative writing
- Pulling together your team
- Strategies for effective collaboration
- Tools for collaboration
- Dealing with differences
- Dealing with conflict
- Finalizing the project
- Reflecting for future projects
- Activities and discussion

What is Collaborative Writing?

Collaborative writing, group writing, team writing, distributed writing – all terms used interchangeably to describe what it generally means to perform collective writing in a professional atmosphere. For our purposes, however, we won't use all of those terms. Why? Because there is a vast difference between collaboration and working in groups or teams; thus, the terms collaborative writing differs greatly from team, group or distributed writing. We will refer to the act of writing together as collaborative writing.

Collaboration involves a mindset that sees the whole as more important than its parts. In other words, when people decide to collaborate, they are deciding to set aside their individual goals for the good of the group or company they represent. Collaboration seeks to combine multiple skill sets, knowledge bases, ideas and engagement from a number of people for the sole purpose of accomplishing a goal that benefits all – regardless of position or title. A collaborative mindset is focused on company success more than it is individual success.

Conversely, team and group writing tends to focus on gathering together for a period of time to accomplish a set goal for a certain project during a specific time or event. It does not necessarily entail a long-term, ingrained mindset that seeks constant success for the good of the company or group. So, collaboration differs from teams and groups because it requires every member of the group or team to take responsibility for the final outcome. It's what happens, for example, when the parents of a child see the success of that child as the responsibility of both parents, not just one. Collaboration is the reason that companies such as Cisco and Coca Cola thrive. According to Ron Ricci and Carl Wiese, authors of *The Collaboration Imperative* (2011), a company's success lies within the people they employ. "It's not hiding in a budget spreadsheet or a warehouse full of inventory. It lies within your people – in their ideas, their experiences, their focus, their

energy. The more you empower them to share their knowledge and skills, the more successful your organization will be. From ideas come innovation and new forms of productivity.”

In their 2015 book *Collaboration Begins with You: Be a Silo Buster*, best-selling author and management expert Ken Blanchard along with co-authors Jane Ripley and Eunice Parisi-Carew discuss what collaboration means. “Collaboration is a whole order of magnitude beyond teams. It’s in the DNA of the company culture,” they write. The authors continue, “It’s an environment that promotes communication, learning, maximum contribution, and innovation – which, of course, all lead to healthy profits.” Thus, successful collaborative writing stems from a company culture that invites collaboration not just writing by way of teams and groups.

Collaborative writing, then, can be defined as...

Writing that entails the collaborative efforts of a group of people who gather together to write documentation, produce images, provide subtext, and more in an effort to bring a project to completion. Members can work in spaces that are face-to-face or virtual. The main goal of collaborative writing is to produce the best work for the good of the company by including the ideas and skill sets of multiple authors.

Why Write Collaboratively

In today’s ever-changing, fast paced world of information, technology and social media, it is increasingly necessary to engage people who are able to contribute a varied set of skills, specialties and who come from various cultures in an effort to produce information that best reflects the company it represents. Today, people in government, science and technology are called upon on a regular basis to communicate large bodies of information in the best and most cost-efficient way possible with an outcome that allows a broad range of people from various backgrounds and walks of life to not only access the information, but to understand the information set forth. Thus, collaborative groups of writers have become more important than ever, making information even more accessible to multiple groups of people.

But collaborative writing is not something that happens in a vacuum, nor is it magically produced after a brief period of writing. Collaborative writing, like all other types of writing is something that requires exercising the process of writing. And it is something that requires time and labor. And, the results can be rewarding. Companies all over the world have found that writing collaboratively can produce favorable outcomes for their better interests. This, however, does not come without costs. While there are many benefits to collaborative writing, there are also disadvantages if the project morphs into team or group writing.

Successful Collaborative Writing

Collaborative writing has many benefits. Because many companies believe the advantages of collaborative writing outweigh the disadvantages, many companies choose to have employees work together on projects with writers as a part of those teams.

But the positive results often attained on company projects rely heavily on the formulation of the team, skill sets, and positive group dynamics, something we’ll talk about a little later. For now, let’s look at the advantages of collaborative writing below.

- **Collaborative writing creates a more enjoyable work environment.** Because members of the team share the responsibilities of the project or writing, they must communicate verbally, electronically, and in some instances they must communicate virtually. These interactions often work to improve and foster a collegial atmosphere, producing a workplace that adds to the overall good of the company.
- **Collaborative writing creates a product that considers diverse audiences.** When a team is created with the thought of diversity, the work they produce tends to be more sensitive to varied cultures and audiences. If, for example, the team incorporates the skill sets of women, men, members of the LGBT community, cis and non-cis males and females as well as members of various races and cultures, the final product will have taken into consideration the complexities of multiple communities, something that is not so easily attained by a single community of writers .
- **Collaborative writing provides an opportunity for employees – both new and not-so-new – to explore skills as both leaders and subordinate team members.** A sage once said, “To be a good leader, you must learn to follow.” Now and then a true leader is born, but a really successful leader is one who has learned to follow. Employees who have been groomed and allowed to rise through the ranks often make the most successful leaders because they are able to understand the tasks at hand and empathize with the challenges created as a

result of the task. Likewise, when organizations choose to rotate the roles of team members, it allows employees to participate in roles such as team lead, recorder, researcher, editor, reporter, and more.

- **Collaborative writing fosters engagement through active learning.** When employees write collaboratively, they put themselves in a position to either learn from or hone their dormant skills as they work with colleagues who may be more adept at a certain skill than they are.
- **Collaborative writing helps to grow the organization.** When all of the members of the team see their contribution as not just important but imperative to the success of the project, they contribute as an owner rather than a worker, ultimately affecting the bottom line – profit. And when a company has become successful as a result of fully engaged employees who see their contributions as the reasons behind the company's success, the longevity of the company is inevitable.
- **Collaborative writing produces a superior product or outcome.** When performed correctly (see notes above about what true collaborative writing is and is not), the end result of the project will be more superior to anything produced outside of collaboration because the most advanced skills will have been utilized and because the members of the team will have drawn on their commitment to the end result for the good of not just themselves but for the good of the entire company.
- **Collaborative writing draws on the use of technology.** With the emergence of so many new collaboration tools and other technological advances designed to make writing more efficient, employees are better able to engage with their colleagues and produce projects in less time and with fewer obstacles than they could without those tools. There are various types of collaboration tools, including e-mail, voicemail, instant messaging (IM), VoIP video call (or voice over IP), online calendars, wikis and shared document workspaces.

A Look at Successful Collaboration

Establish clear objectives and tasks

Successful collaboration is created by the use of several strategies, including the ability to establish clear objectives and tasks. Just as with individual writing, team writing must employ clear objectives. It is imperative for the success of the project that the objective is clear from the outset. Clear objectives serve as a goal or end result the team aims to achieve. Those goals or objectives serve as a sort of “lighthouse” that can be seen from a distance to help guide the members to “safe harbors” or guide the members to a successful end result.

Each member of the team should know from the start what is expected of her. She should know her specific part and the connection of that part to the tasks and roles of other team members. Each member should see her role as important and one, which, if not completed with an inside-out mindset (a term created by Blanchard, Ripley and Parisi-Carew to indicate the need for collaboration to start on the inside of a person's heart, move to her intellect and finally to the hands – where the work occurs), will negatively impact the project.

It is important, then, that the team develop a space to meet and discuss the project – to ask questions, share ideas, provide input on the overall project, etc.

Conduct effective meetings

Another strategy of successful collaboration is the ability to conduct effective meetings that allow members to comfortably share their views and expertise. Being able to do so is often contingent on the ability of the team to employ careful listening skills versus just allowing a member to speak where team members just hear what is being shared. The difference in the two – listening versus hearing – is defined by intent and purpose. In *The Science and Art of Listening* (2012), Seth Horowitz delineates the two this way: “The difference between the sense of hearing and the skill of listening is attention.” In order to listen versus hear what is being said, then, you must choose (or intend) to understand what is being said, you must give your attention to what is being said. “Listening is a skill that we're in danger of losing in a world of digital distraction and information overload.” (Horowitz, 2012). “The richness of life doesn't lie in the loudness and the beat,” he continues, “but in the timbres and the variations that you can discern if you simply pay attention.” (Horowitz, 2012).

Set a project schedule

Successful collaboration is also dependent upon setting a project schedule. In today's technological world, there is an abundance of tools that enable teams to successfully achieve their end result by have a clear view of what is needed and when. Tools such as *WorkZone*, *Basecamp*, and *Microsoft Project*, among others, allow teams to know the schedule of their project and see the progress throughout.

Keep them honest

Maintaining a sense of ethical responsibility toward the project and team members is not only important, but it is imperative for the success of the project. In *Business Ethics: Concepts and Cases* (2011), Manuel G. Velasquez outlines ethical standards that are helpful to consider in collaborative situations.

- **Rights:** Everyone has a right to engage in intellectual discussions at work without fear of reprisal. Likewise, when a document or product is produced, the general public has a right to expect that honesty was central in its production.
- **Justice:** Everyone should receive the same justice regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Team members should be treated the same. If not, the team can become divided into separate "camps," and the project can, in turn, become derailed.
- **Utility:** Consideration should be given for how group decisions will impact all involved. When the group operates as one unit, members will consider the impact that decisions will have on each of its members. The idea of operating as silos is thrown out of the window because it is understood that what affects one affects all.
- **Care:** Because the group operates from the "inside-out" mindset (heart-head-hand), care is given to those who are closest to members and with whom members work.

Encourage discussion and diversity

Finally, successful collaboration is contingent upon the very definition of collaboration as discussed earlier in the chapter – fostering an environment that promotes communication, learning, maximum contribution, and innovation. (Blanchard, Ripley, Parisi-Carew, 2012). In other words, team members must feel comfortable sharing and at times debating about their ideas. Members should be allowed to fully operate in the diversity they bring to the team. No team member should be made to feel that her contribution is less important than that of other team members because she may be differently abled. Likewise, a team member who is a part of the LGBTQ community, even if his sexual orientation is not considered a part of the majority in the workplace, should be allowed to communicate ideas on the project from his perspective. Allowing a contribution of ideas from diverse perspectives is best for the project because it takes into consideration the diverse audience who will most likely be the readers of the project. In the end, openness in discussion creates a product that considers the audience, a primary rule in writing for technical audiences.

In his article "6 Fundamentals of Effective Collaboration" (2010) that appeared in *Talent Culture World of Work*, Chris Jones, an IT Strategy and Change Management consultant, muses on his "secret sauce" ingredients for effective collaboration. Jones identifies six ideas he insists is necessary for effective collaboration.

- Engagement
- Keeping it real (being authentic)
- A bias for learning and discovery
- Respect for community members
- Driving a positive vibe
- Focus on results

Notice the similarities between the four standards identified by Velasquez (2011) and the six ideas listed by Jones (2010). Indeed, without these, collaboration in writing or in any other team setting will not be successful.

How is collaboration viewed in the working world?: A view from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)

In guiding federal employees on creating work environments that best reflect the vision and policies of the federal government, the Office of Personnel Management produced documentation that encourage collaborative team environments. The OPM cites the following as requirements for successful collaboration

- Have a common purpose and goal
- Trust each other
- Clarify roles
- Communicate openly and effectively
- Appreciate diversity
- Balance the team's focus

Ineffective Collaborative Writing

When collaborative writing morphs back to a team or silo mindset, it creates situations that work against the good of the group. Keep the following in mind as you establish your team and as you work through the project.

- **Avoid the "Me" syndrome** where too many people seek the role of leadership. When a clear hierarchy and roles have not been established in the group, the inevitable outcome is that you develop disjointed teams, thereby developing a disjointed project. This takes away from the collaborative environment.
- **Avoid the development of a multi-voice project** where an agreed upon voice does not come through in the project. Having an agreed upon style sheet can help to alleviate this problem. Another strategy to avoid creating a multi-voice project is to establish a team member or members as editors who review the final draft, checking specifically for the voice and tone of the message.
- **Avoid the tendency to have one or a few people shoulder the load of the team.** This is sometimes created when ethical standards are not maintained and when members feel de-valued. When this happens, other members of the team who feel alienated tend to lose motivation to work, often abandoning the project.
- **Avoid the tendency to engage in groupthink** where members care more about getting along and becoming friends than they do about the goal of the project.
- **Avoid the tendency to side with certain persons based on traits held in common** when a conflict arises. Always maintain the goal and purpose of the project so that conflict resolution is paramount for the good of the team and the project.

Scenarios for Consideration

Scenario #1

You work as a technical communicator for Apple, Inc. You have been charged with pulling together a team of writers, graphic artists, and subject matter experts (SME) to produce instructions for the latest Mac Book. The instructions must be produced in 30 days, a shorter time period than the three months typically given for such a project.

After assembling the team, assigning tasks and setting a schedule, you find that two of the team members, a subject matter expert and technical writer, have had past conflicts and have since found it difficult to work together. You pull the two team members aside, listen to each of their positions and insist that they leave the past behind them for the good of the project.

Two weeks pass, and you find that the two have not met to discuss their tasks. The problem with this is that other tasks given to other members of the team heavily rely on the SME and writer meeting to get the ball rolling.

As the project lead, you call the two together again to help them work through their differences. During the meeting you inform the SME that she must acknowledge her past fault for the good of the project. You say nothing to the writer about her contribution to the past conflict.

Consequently, the work on the project begins, but the spirit of the group is at an all time low at every group meeting. The project is finished, albeit two weeks late.

While presenting the finished product to the executive team, the response is negative, and you, the team lead find that the blame has been placed on you for not producing a superior product.

Questions for consideration:

1. What, if anything, went wrong?
2. What, if anything, could have been done differently to produce different results?
3. Considering the suggestions above for successful collaboration, which guidelines were or were not followed?
4. As a mentor to the team lead, what specific suggestions would you give her for her next project?

Scenario #2

Sherry, an environmental engineer working for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was chosen as the team lead on a project designed to provide a clearer understanding for the community of the EPA's role in the new water project being instituted for the *Clean River Initiative* in the Greenspan Chattahoochee Community. In order to fulfill her responsibility to her employer and the community, she recognized the need to produce documents – pamphlets, posters, blogs, radio advertisements, etc. in preparation for the upcoming festival a year away to unveil the project to the community.

Sherry enlisted the help of several members from various departments of the EPA, including Valarie, a production design assistant; Ricky, a systems engineer; Gabriella, community outreach coordinator; Myron, a health educator; and Erin, technical writer.

Once assembled, Sherry explained the project and the need for the group to understand the "," approach – the need to focus on the heart of the project followed by their intellect followed by the use of their hands. In other words, Sherry explained that the end result was contingent upon the entire team to see the project as something they all owned and were doing for the good of the organization and the community. "In the end," Sherry explained, "the community will benefit and have access to clean drinking water, which in turn will impact the cleanliness of all rivers."

The team came together to create a strategy for how best to communicate the message that clean rivers produce better health, which creates a stronger community. Working over a period of 12-14 months, the project came together as Sherry and her team created events that involved the community and that explained the connection of health to clean water vs. dirty water. The events included documents created by Valarie based on research produced by Diana and written by Sam. Ricky, in turn, saw to it that the documents created could be used across technological mediums such as social media, television, radio, and the internet.

The outcome was an event that the entire team and the organization could claim as their own, for they all played integral parts in making the project a success.

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